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Strategic Impotence

Army major points to two presidents and their advisers for loss in Vietnam

DERELICTION OF DUTY
Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam
By H.R. McMaster
HarperCollins; 446 pages; $27.50

REVIEWED BY DANIEL L. WICK

Why and how did the United States become involved in Vietnam's civil war, resulting in the loss of more than 58,000 American lives, untold billions of dollars and the American people's traditional trust in their government? Was it, as most historians have maintained, the inevitable result of a "Cold War mentality" with its insistence on the containment of communism at any cost?

In his brilliant analysis of the origins of the Vietnam War, U.S. Army Major H.R. McMaster argues against the prevailing view: "Vietnam was not forced on the United States by a tidal wave of Cold War ideology. It slunk in on cat's feet."

McMaster, who received his commission in 1984 and served as commander of an armored cavalry troop in the Gulf War, observes, "I thought that to better prepare myself to lead soldiers in combat it was important to learn from the experiences of others, and the most recent U.S. war seemed as good a starting place as any."

The result is a penetrating analysis of the gradual U.S. involvement in Vietnam that places blame for the eventual debacle squarely on presidents Kennedy and Johnson and their key civilian and military advisers.

After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Kennedy, never an admirer of the military, sought to weaken the authority of the Joint Chiefs of Staff by appointing his own presidential military adviser, retired General Maxwell Taylor, a self-proclaimed expert on counterinsurgency and author of the doctrine of "flexible response."

Kennedy later appointed Taylor chairman of the Joint Chiefs, where, says McMaster, Taylor consistently distorted the advice of the service chiefs, substituting his own recommendations on military matters. But the president relied for most of his military advice primarily on Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and his team of civilian "whiz kids." The Cuban missile crisis, generally hailed as a Kennedy success story, set a dangerous precedent, McMaster says, by causing McNamara to believe that "graduated pressure" short of war, like the U.S. naval blockade of Cuba, would work effectively against any foe.

Graduated pressure in 1964 consisted of "border control operations, retaliatory actions, and graduated overt military actions by South Vietnamese and U.S. forces against North Vietnam," McMaster says, the purpose of which was to persuade Hanoi to abandon its support of the Viet Cong.

Amid the admiration within the Johnson administration for the graduated-pressure doctrine, the War Games Division of the Joint Chiefs of Staff organized a war game in September 1964 called SIGMA II, which attempted to predict how Hanoi and the Viet Cong would react to this strategy. The result, in retrospect, proved uncannily accurate: "Frustration in the air campaign compelled the introduction of U.S. ground combat units into South Vietnam. . . . Ultimately SIGMA II predicted that the escalation of American military involvement would erode public support for the war in the United States."

FROM 'DERELICTION OF DUTY'

After this Jan. 10, 1964, meeting with Defense Secretary Robert McNamara (right), President Johnson approved covert operations against North Vietnam

But the results of the game were ignored by the policymakers. Johnson and McNamara continued to marginalize the Joint Chiefs of Staff, using it primarily to review decisions already made. Although opposed to graduated pressure, the Joint Chiefs were unable to suggest alternative strategies. In part, this was due to interservice rivalries. But the joint chiefs, even after Maxwell Taylor's departure to become ambassador to South Vietnam, simply did not have the ear of the president.

"[Johnson] sought to avoid or to postpone indefinitely an explicit choice between war and disengagement from South Vietnam. . . . [But] each decision he made moved the United States closer to war, although he seemed not to recognize that fact."

Desperately trying to conceal the problems of the South Vietnamese regime and the increasing U.S. commitment of men and materiel to its support, Johnson and McNamara, says McMaster, time and again lied to the American people and to Congress: "LBJ . . . misrepresented the mission of U.S. ground forces in Vietnam, distorted the views of the Chiefs to lend credibility to his decision against mobilization, grossly understated the numbers of troops General Westmoreland had requested, and lied to the Congress about the monetary cost of actions already approved and of those awaiting final decision."

The transition from graduated pressure to the actual commitment of significant ground forces in March 1965 passed with little notice. And so the United States, with no clear military or political objective, was drawn into a war of attrition that it could not possibly win.

As McMaster pointedly concludes:

"The war in Vietnam was not lost in the field, nor was it lost on the front pages of the New York Times or on the college campuses. It was lost in Washington, D.C., even before Americans assumed sole responsibility for the fighting in 1965 and before they realized the country was at war." ■

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